

## **What Is Grand Strategy?**<sup>\*</sup>

**by**

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When my colleagues Paul Kennedy, Charlie Hill, and I first began talking about setting up a grand strategy course at Yale in the late 1990s, at least half the people to whom we tried to explain this thought we were talking about “grant” strategy: how do you get the next federal or foundation grant?

This misunderstanding would not have occurred, I think, during the fifty years of insecurity that separated the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, from the final collapse of the Soviet Union in December, 1991. We had a grand strategy for fighting World War II already in place at the time of Pearl Harbor – go after Germany first – and with adjustments we stuck to it throughout that conflict. We had, in containment, a grand strategy for fighting the Cold War worked out within the first five years of that conflict – some would say earlier. With adjustments, we held on to that strategy for the next four decades, despite the confusions generated by our domestic politics, our relations with allies, and at least one grievous miscalculation of fundamental interests, which was the war in Vietnam. We maintained purpose and direction during those dangerous years because we had to. For as Dr. Samuel Johnson once put it: “Depend on it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

Now, maybe historians of some distant future will conclude that the United States has been equally adept at framing and sustaining grand strategies during the two decades that have passed since the Cold War ended. Revisionist ingenuity is always surprising. But I have difficulty right now seeing how that argument is going to be made. Consider the record.

The administration of George H. W. Bush, facing the most favorable prospects ever for the use of American power in the international arena, spoke grandly of building a

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“new world order” but then did little to bring it about, as if the coining of a phrase alone would construct the reality. The Clinton administration spoke of “enlargement” and “engagement,” without specifying what was to be “enlarged” or who was to be “engaged.” It was a bad sign when President Clinton assured an aide in 1994 that Roosevelt and Truman had gotten along fine without grand strategies. They’d just made it up as they went along, and he didn’t see why he couldn’t do the same.<sup>1</sup>

The morning of September 11, 2001, dispelled any lingering illusions on that score, just as abruptly as the attack on Pearl Harbor ended a similar period of complacency on another morning almost six decades earlier. But would anybody claim, seven and a half years later, that the strategy George W. Bush devised compares favorably with the ones Roosevelt and Truman embraced during World War II and the early Cold War?

Bush’s strategy succeeded in one important respect: there were no further attacks on American soil, and for that he will eventually get the credit he deserves. The surge in Iraq will also be remembered as a Bush success, but one necessitated by his greatest failure, which was not knowing what to do with Iraq once he was in charge of it. Beyond that, the record is disappointing, especially when compared with the seven and a half years after Pearl Harbor, during which the Roosevelt and Truman strategies vanquished two formidable adversaries and were containing a third, while leaving the United States in a far stronger position at home and abroad than it had been in when external dangers first shook it out of its isolationism.

So it seems fair, looking back on the years since the Cold War ended, to apply the Ronald Reagan test: are we better off in 2009 than we were in 1989? I don’t think so. And why didn’t Dr. Johnson’s great principle – that danger is a school for strategy – work as well following 9/11 as it did after Pearl Harbor? That’s a really good question.

You’ve heard a lot in recent years about the democratic deficit, and even more now about the financial deficit and the common sense deficit that accompanied it. What I’m suggesting is that there’s a grand strategic deficit, that it’s been developing over the past two decades, and that its roots extend even further back than that.

I’d like to use this talk to suggest some explanations for this phenomenon, drawing at least in part on the experience my colleagues Kennedy, Hill, and I have accumulated over the past eight years – sixteen semesters now – of teaching grand strategy at Yale. I do so in the spirit of Dr. Johnson, who I think would not have minded this amendment to his famous aphorism: “Depend on it, sir, the prospect of trying to persuade bright students that you know more than they do concentrates the mind amazingly.”

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<sup>1</sup>Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 133.

## I.

Let me begin with the event that caused us to begin teaching this class. The date was September 24, 1998. A NATO briefing team had invited itself to Yale to make the case for the Clinton administration's policy of expanding the alliance eastward. There would be no problem about including the Czechs, the Poles, and the Hungarians, the briefers told us, because so much effort had gone into reorganizing committees in Brussels to make them feel welcome. The briefing concluded after about half an hour, and questions were called for.

Our colleague Bruce Russett raised his hand and asked whether NATO expansion might not cause difficulties with the Russians, perhaps undermining President Yeltsin's efforts to democratize the country, perhaps creating an awkward situation for the new or prospective members of the alliance as Russian power revived, perhaps even driving Russia into some new form of cooperation with the Chinese, thereby reversing one of the greatest victories for the West in the Cold War, which was the Sino-Soviet split. There was a moment of shocked silence. Then one of the briefers exclaimed, in front of our entire audience: "Good God! We'd never thought of that!"

Some of you may remember how often General George C. Marshall, arguably the greatest of modern American grand strategists, complained about what he called "theateritis" – the tendency of military commanders to look only at the needs of their own theater of operation, and not at the requirements of fighting the war as a whole. The best illustration of this was a Herblock cartoon from the Korean War. It showed General Douglas MacArthur – often a cause of General Marshall's anxieties – planning military operations on a square globe, with only the Asian mainland visible at the top of it. A nervous Washington official is reminding him: "We've been using more of a roundish one here lately, sir."

Washington was indeed, at the time, using more of a roundish one, which had something to do with why the Korean War did not become the Third World War. How, then, could an official briefing team come to Yale in 1998 and wind up looking equally theater-centric? MacArthur's theateritis at least had a certain grandeur about it: war with China, whether you liked the idea or not, was no small thing. But committee structures in Brussels?

I wrote in my diary that evening that grand strategy had apparently been subcontracted to Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern. And as Professors Kennedy, Hill, and I walked out of the briefing that afternoon, shaking our heads at what we'd heard, we agreed that something had to be done. That was the beginning of the Yale grand strategy seminar.

## II.

But Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern – is that really fair? Perhaps our briefers, like those hapless emissaries of Shakespeare’s King Claudius, had got their instructions garbled, and weren’t really reflecting what was happening at higher levels. Surely more careful thought had been given to the implications of NATO expansion: after all, it’s the only post-Cold War American foreign policy initiative that’s been pursued now with equal enthusiasm by two presidential administrations – Clinton’s and Bush’s – which agreed on little else. The historical record, however, does not reassure.

The story begins with President George H. W. Bush’s assurances to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990, echoed by West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, that if the Soviet Union would accept a reunified Germany’s membership in the NATO alliance, its expansion would go no further. There was, in the months that followed, occasional talk among Bush administration officials about eventually inviting several of the former Soviet satellite states to join NATO, but nothing had been done when the Clinton administration took office.

Then, on April 21, 1993, the new president, running late as he often did, kept several guests waiting at the White House. They included the Polish president Lech Walesa and the Czech president Vaclav Havel, both of whom were in town for the dedication of the new Holocaust Museum, along with Elie Wiesel, the most famous survivor of the Holocaust. When Clinton finally received his distinguished visitors, they’d had time to agree on a single suggestion for him: expand NATO to include the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary.

Clinton proclaimed it an excellent idea on the spot, and from that moment NATO expansion became United States policy.<sup>2</sup> It continued to be through the end of the George W. Bush administration, which by the time it left office had presided over the incorporation into the alliance of seven additional states – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria – and was pushing for its further expansion to include Ukraine and Georgia.

The NATO of 2009, as a result, is a very different organization from the one its founders – the British, the French, and the Benelux countries – had in mind when they invited the United States to establish it in 1948. The objective then had been to defend existing democracies against any expansion of Soviet influence. The objective under Clinton and Bush became that of spreading democracy by expanding the alliance as far as possible among countries that once lay within the Soviet sphere of influence, and even into territories that had once been part of the former Soviet Union itself. The Bush administration even added the idea of placing missiles within this region, although of course for defensive purposes only. This was not a totally original concept, as students of the Cuban missile crisis may remember.

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<sup>2</sup>For the details, see James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington: Brookings, 1999), pp. 14-20.

The procedure by which all this happened was also different from the way NATO worked during the Cold War. It was then a consultative alliance, with the United States – its most powerful member – showing extraordinary deference to the wishes of its other alliance partners: they had proposed the alliance in the first place, and in contrast to its rival the Warsaw Pact, their actions largely shaped it. The post-Cold War expansion of the alliance, however, was and continues to be chiefly an American initiative, about which the original members have always been uneasy. Why? Well, for reasons similar to those raised by Professor Russett: that it might cause complications with the Russians.

So why did the Americans push it with such persistence? Perhaps with the thought that Russia was, and would always be, so weak that even if it did object to NATO expansion, it would never be able to do anything about it? Perhaps in the belief that, if the Russians did rebuild their power, they wouldn't play the old American game of linkage, so that democracy expansion and missile defense would remain disconnected in the minds of Kremlin leaders? Perhaps with the expectation that the new and prospective members, knowing NATO lacked the military means of defending them against a resurgent Russia, would take care not to offend that country? Perhaps because NATO enlargement gratified domestic political interests? Perhaps for no more complicated reason than that once a policy rock starts rolling down a policy hill, it's too hard to reverse it so you might as well get behind it? Whatever the reasons, they did not add up to a grand strategy. That's become obvious over the past six months, as the Russians have shown us what a real grand strategy looks like.

They waited patiently until a young American-educated democracy enthusiast who happened to be the president of a prospective member state went a bit too far, whereupon they invaded his country, occupied enough of it to show how easily they could control all of it, and then withdrew from most of it. They chose a country that had not yet joined NATO, showing that they had the capacity to defy the alliance without actually having to do so. They quickly produced, thereby, a psychological chilling effect on all who sought the further expansion of the alliance, and then added to it an actual physical chill this winter by reminding both the new and old European members of NATO who controls their energy supplies. It isn't the United States, which from eastern and central Europe now looks distant and ineffectual, something that cannot be said of Russia. Which, presumably, was the objective of the strategy the Russians set in motion in the first place last summer.

Mao Zedong used to like to tell his associates that the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu were a noose around the neck of the Chinese Nationalists and their American allies, which he could tighten or relax whenever he found it useful. Nikita Khrushchev had a similar but more graphic saying about Berlin: it was, he would chuckle, “the testicles of the West. Every time I want to make the West scream, I squeeze on Berlin.”<sup>3</sup>

Now surely one purpose of a grand strategy is to diminish the possibility of having a noose around your neck tightened, or – well, never mind. Either alternative

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<sup>3</sup>John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 140, 251.

would have the effect, as Dr. Johnson would have put it, of concentrating the mind. But the American strategy of expanding NATO has managed to place the alliance in just that vulnerable position: the Russians can now tighten, or squeeze, or prod, or poke, or turn on and off the gas, whenever they like. So is NATO stronger now than it was when this strategy was first set in motion? I'm not at all sure that it is.

The NATO expansion case shows, I think, how a kind of conceptual “theateritis” can set in, even at the highest levels of government, even over a considerable period of time. You focus on one big thing, which in this instance has been the undeniably worthy cause of democracy promotion. But you neglect a few other little things, such as how far the expansion process should go, how Russia might respond to it, whether small states targeted for inclusion will always act wisely, how military strength dissipates as perimeters to be defended grow larger, how great powers that have become enfeebled can regain their strength, how power can reside in the ability to keep people shivering – which, come to think of it, is the danger that drove the United States, in 1947, to come up with the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan in the first place. Details? To be sure. But devils have been shown to reside within them.

### III.

So maybe our Yale briefing was not an anomaly. Perhaps with respect to NATO expansion, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern really have been in charge. And if that's the case, then similar experts may have been designing other aspects of post-Cold War American grand strategy, thereby contributing to the grand strategic deficit I mentioned. But let's reserve judgment on that unhappy thought for the moment. Instead, I want to repay the debt my colleagues and I owe to Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, who without quite realizing what they were doing, contributed so much to getting the Yale grand strategy seminar underway. It seems only fair now to admit them belatedly to that class, and to review what we might have tried to teach them.

We'd have begun by reminding Roz and Gil – as they'd have asked us to call them – that we we'd not be offering them a public policy course, for those are already available to the northeast and to the southwest of New Haven. We'd not be trying to influence what was happening in Washington now or in the foreseeable future. Instead we'd be building on Henry Kissinger's observation that “the convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office.”<sup>4</sup> We'd be trying to enhance the intellectual capital of Roz, Gil, and their fellow students. This would be a hedge against the day when they'd be running things and we'd be dead, or senile, or they'd be too busy to take our phone calls or track our twitters. We'd have their attention at the moment – at least as much as it's possible to get the attention of any overcommitted Wi-Fi addicted Yalie – and we'd be taking advantage of it.

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<sup>4</sup>Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 54.

Within these limits, we'd conceive of grand strategy very broadly. My own definition – not shared by my colleagues, for we are argumentative in the classroom – is that grand strategy is the calculated relationship of means to large ends. It's about how one uses whatever one has to get to wherever it is one wants to go. Our knowledge of it derives chiefly from the realm of war and statecraft, because the fighting of wars and the management of states have demanded the calculation of relationships between means and ends for a longer stretch of time than any other documented area of collective human activity.

But grand strategy need not apply only to war and statecraft: it's potentially applicable to any endeavor in which means must be deployed in the pursuit of important ends. That's why we regularly get papers from our students on the grand strategy of navigating the Yale curriculum, or of surviving a summer internship, or of achieving success in soccer, football, and especially rowing, a sport that particularly attracts the members of our class, probably because of its ancient echoes in Herodotus and Thucydides. As does, predictably, one other topic of great significance to them, which is the grand strategy of falling in and out of love.

#### IV.

How, though, would we teach this subject? We'd explain to Roz and Gil that our course, which begins in the spring, extends over the summer, and concludes in the fall, encompasses three schools: a school of the classics, a school of surprise, and a school of responsibility. Let me explain what I mean by each of these, starting with the classics.

There's a reason why people continue to read them, but hardly anyone ever tells you precisely what it is. George Kennan, looking backward, came close in 1959 when he wrote that only the study of history "can expose the nature of man as revealed in simpler and more natural conditions, where that which was elemental was less concealed by artificialities." Thucydides, looking forward, said much the same thing 24 centuries earlier when he introduced his great history of the Peloponnesian War as "a possession for all time," meant for those "who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it."<sup>5</sup>

Roz and Gil would be studying Thucydides and Kennan in the spring semester of our Yale seminar, and a good many other chroniclers and practitioners of grand strategy as well. They'd include Sun Tzu, Polybius, Machiavelli, Elizabeth I, Philip II, the Founding Fathers, Kant, Metternich, Clausewitz, Lincoln, Bismarck, Salisbury, Wilson, Churchill, the two Roosevelts, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Kissinger, Isaiah Berlin, and

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<sup>5</sup>George F. Kennan, "The Experience of Writing History," in Stephen Vaughn, ed., *The Vital Past: Writings on the Uses of History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 97; *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to The Peloponnesian War*, Richard Crawley translation, edited by Robert B. Strassser (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 16.

Ronald Reagan – all within thirteen weeks. Some of our colleagues at Yale find this eclecticism a bit alarming, so we've tried to reassure them in a couple of ways.

One has been to suggest that we're vicariously enlarging our students' experience, which is what all educators do. It's true that babies quickly develop strategies for getting what they want without ever having read Sun Tzu or Clausewitz. But their parents do, nonetheless, eventually pack them off to school, on the grounds that it would be inefficient for them to go through life making it all up as they go along: that there's value in exposing them, in a properly distilled form, to the accumulated wisdom of those who have gone before. They do so in the spirit of Machiavelli, who reminded his prince that "no greater gift could be made by me than to give you the capacity to be able to understand in a very short time all that I have learned and understood in so many years and with so many hardships and dangers for myself."<sup>6</sup>

Another way we justify our spring semester is to cite its distinguished predecessors. One was Edward Meade Earle's edited collection of essays, *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, which appeared in 1943 and immediately became the single most influential primer on grand strategy for American wartime and postwar planners.<sup>7</sup> Another was the curriculum Kennan set up at the National War College in the summer of 1946, just after sending his "long telegram" from Moscow: it's clear from his notes that he relied heavily on Earle in educating himself about grand strategy, and then in figuring out how to teach that subject to students who'd already experienced, on their own, the intersection of war and statecraft.

We've also been influenced by the example of the Harvard "International Seminar," created by William Yandell Elliott and run by the young Henry Kissinger, which between 1951 and 1967 recruited hundreds of emerging European, Asian, African, and Latin American leaders for summer seminars on the relationship between scholarship, strategy, and statecraft.<sup>8</sup> Yet another precedent has been the famous "Thucydides" curriculum in "Strategy and Policy" at the Naval War College, set up by Admiral Stansfield Turner when he became president of that institution in 1972. By sheer luck, I had the privilege of helping to teach that course as a young and very green academic. Decades later, I asked Turner where he got the idea of starting it with Thucydides. "Oh," he said, "I got it from Yale, back in the days when you used to teach that sort of thing."

And why had Yale, and other comparable civilian universities, gotten away from teaching the classics as a way of training leaders? I think it had to do in part with the counter-cultural trends of the 1960s, which saw something sinister in studying the uses of power. It also fell out of fashion to teach the works of dead white males, because they were dead white males. But I believe it also reflected the pressures within the university

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<sup>6</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by Harvey C. Mansfield, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup>Edward Meade Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943).

<sup>8</sup>Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 115-20.

to specialize, which used to exist chiefly at the graduate and professional school level, but have been extending further and further down into the undergraduate curriculum, so that the old sense of a “liberal” education as a “general” education hardly exists any more.

Grand strategy is an ecological discipline, in that it requires the ability to see how all of the parts of a problem relate to one another, and therefore to the whole thing. It requires specialization to some extent – the mastery of certain parts – but it also demands generalization, for without that skill there can be no sense of how an entire system works, where it’s been, and where it’s going. Athletic teams know this, hence the value they attach to seeing everything that’s happening on the playing field all at once. But how many other places around your university or mine try to train their students to do this?

To put in terms made famous by Isaiah Berlin, we’re good at educating hedgehogs, who know one big thing, and much less adept at training foxes, who know lots of little things and have the agility to cope with them. That leads, not surprisingly, to a kind of professional theateritis – despite the fact that the likelihood of any of our undergraduates remaining in the same profession throughout their lives has become vanishingly small.

There was a time when the purpose of undergraduate instruction was to train foxes, partly because that’s how the term “liberal education” was defined, partly because two world wars and a cold war created a need for generalists who could do a lot of different things equally well. Perhaps the price we’ve paid for a safer world is to lose the capacity to produce generalists. For if, as Dr. Johnson insisted, the prospect of being hanged in a fortnight clears the mind, then it would make sense that the prospect of *not* being hanged any time soon muddles it.

## V.

Roz and Gil would come out of our spring semester, then, steeped – even if superficially – in the classics. But what are young people supposed to do with a classical education, however compressed it may be, once they’ve got it? We’ve thought a lot about that question, and have found an answer of sorts in another classical tradition, which is the odyssey. Thucydides wrote of “experience which is learnt in the school of danger,”<sup>9</sup> and that’s how an odyssey has usually been understood: it’s a time of testing in which you pit your own strength and cunning against ogres, gorgons, sirens, cyclopic giants, and sometimes really bad weather.

These days, however, the Yale Legal Office frowns on that sort of thing, so we prefer the term “school of surprise.” And instead of drawing on Homer as a guide, we follow the more gentle example of Patrick Leigh Fermor, whose memoir, *A Time of Gifts*, describes how, as a classically educated 18-year-old English schoolboy in the year 1933, he walked across Europe. “To change scenery,” Fermor writes, to “abandon London and England and set out . . . like a tramp – or, as I characteristically phrased it to myself, like

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<sup>9</sup>The Landmark Thucydides, p. 14.

a pilgrim or a palmer, an errant scholar, a broken knight . . . All of a sudden, this was not merely the obvious, but the only thing to do.”<sup>10</sup>

If updated for the opportunities and constraints of our own age, it can certainly be a useful thing for grand strategy students to do. All of them learn, from reading Clausewitz, that on battlefields “the light of reason is refracted in a manner quite different from that which is normal in academic speculation.”<sup>11</sup> Most of our students won’t be on military battlefields, but their lives will be filled with other battles in which the light of reason will not be refracted as it was in our classroom. That’s what we hope to give them a sense of in our summer school of surprise.

An odyssey, we believe, should be something more than an internship, where the only monsters confronted tend to be difficult bosses, recalcitrant copying machines, and boring routines: if there are ogres or gorgons, they operate on a small scale. So rather than sending Roz and Gil on one of those assignments, we’d try if at all possible to give them a Patrick Leigh Fermor experience: an adventure that would get them out into the wide surprising world, with the great classical texts still fresh in their mind.

Why not, we’d say to them, go to Syria or Egypt to practice your Arabic, and hang out with some radical sheiks while you’re there? Why not check out security at former Soviet bio-weapons facilities in Kazakhstan, or track pipeline construction along the ancient Silk Road? Why not study Russian for a month in St. Petersburg, and then take two months to come home by way of Siberia? Why not tour Latin America studying the imperial architecture of Philip II? Why not go to China, speak only Chinese, and check out the places they won’t let you see when you become ambassador? Why not go live in a yurt somewhere, and teach your yurt-mates to sing songs from “Oklahoma,” or “Guys and Dolls”?

And when you do encounter the unexpected – a spectacular sunrise over Lake Baikal, for example, or wolves following you as you backpack across Tibet, or the Chinese security guy sitting behind you on a dusty bus outside of Urumchi who taps you on the shoulder and asks, officially, in perfect English, “How do you like Yale?” – if these kinds of things happen to you, as they have to earlier students, ask yourself what Sun Tzu, or Metternich, or perhaps Lord Salisbury, would have made of this?

You’ll return from this kind of internship with lessons that will stay with you for the rest of your life – even if you spend large portions of it stuck in some boring office working for some ogre-like boss. You’ll have the inner confidence that comes from having done something extraordinary in your youth – from having gone through a school of surprise if not a school of danger – and you’ll be able to draw on that experience in all the crises to come.

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<sup>10</sup>Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time of Gifts* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 113.

## VI.

By the beginning of the fall semester, then, our students Roz and Gil will have arrived back in New Haven, smiling, sun-tanned, and a little shaggy, ready to begin the third part of our course, which is the school of responsibility. Our objective here is to preview the world in which they'll work, for we don't want them doing odysseys all their lives. That means mastering the contemporary classics: Fukuyama, Huntington, Zakaria, Kagan, and now Walter Russell Mead, who is co-teaching the class with us this year. Theirs are the books that have defined the post-Cold War world. We use them as a framework for what follows, which is the most dreaded portion of our course: the seven weeks we spend on student policy briefs or, as the military likes to call them, murder boards.

Up to this point, we've been nice to our students; but now this stops, because we don't want them to get the idea that the world is going to be nice to them. So we turn ourselves into ogres, requiring the students, in teams of three or four each week, to brief us on one of several broad issues that current and future leaders are going to have to face. Last fall's topics included globalization and finance, demographics and migration, environment and energy, culture and public health, international law and ethics, alliances and multilateralism, and the proper uses of military power.

It's up to the students to decide what policy-makers need to know about these problems, in terms of action that needs to be taken now, what the present administration should try to accomplish before it leaves office, and where the long-term national interest lies. We require written briefs prepared according to General Marshall's specifications from World War II: hence, they're called "Marshall briefs." But the students must also deliver their briefs orally in business attire using Power Point, before their classmates and their professors. The faculty particularly enjoy this part of the course, because we get to play the president of the United States and his top advisers. Sometimes, we're even able to arrange for real or recent top advisers, without warning, to walk in the door.

We simulate as closely as possible the conditions of a real-world briefing, interrupting our students frequently, demanding to know the sources of the information they're giving us, chewing them out for not having it on hand or presenting it well. If they start reading their Power Point slides aloud to us, we'll stop them, or even get up and stalk out of the room. We haven't yet taken up Kissinger's old habit of ripping apart written briefs, wadding them into little balls, and throwing them at the oral briefers, but I have that on my list of things to try this fall.

Our objective is to train our students to handle responsibility, for virtually all of them, sooner than they may realize, will be called upon to brief a boss. We expect them to compress complexity while conveying it clearly – in short, to generalize, that skill so rarely taught in Yale's increasingly professionalized, specialized curriculum. Most of all, though, we're trying to teach poise under pressure. We want our students to learn how not to get rattled. We want them to be able to say, without embarrassment: "I don't know, sir (or ma'am), but I'll get you that information."

One of our students commented last year, after a particularly difficult session, “you’re teaching us how to fail.” And then she added: “Nobody’s ever done that before.” I think that’s right, for in a university in which the average grade is A-/B+, there’s an espresso bar in the library, and the college dining halls serve Alice Waters cuisine, it’s not as though our students are going through boot camp. Only the athletes, debaters, actors, and musicians get training in how to fail – and, even more important, how to recover from failure. We’re trying to extend that training into our classroom, because we know it’s going to be needed in life.

Our course concludes by relinquishing responsibility to our students. They elect a president and vice-president of the United States, who in turn appoint a staff, a cabinet, and a press secretary. On two successive weekends in December, we take over a Yale building, turn it into the White House, and from our secure control room run a crisis simulation exercise in two stages.

The “administration” first has to prepare a national strategy statement on something, but they won’t know what it is until they come in at the beginning of the day. They have to do this under the scrutiny of the media – *Yale Daily News* reporters perform that function – while fending off Congressional investigations and defusing diplomatic crises. Former students from the class play these roles gleefully, using appropriate regional accents and, for the diplomacy, difficult foreign languages. And of course the president is called out of the Oval Office frequently for ceremonial occasions, such as reading to school children, pardoning Thanksgiving turkeys, or lighting the national Christmas tree: we have a particular tree outside which we use for this purpose each year.

On the second weekend, a full-blown crisis erupts that requires the administration to put its strategy into operation. Quite often, under the pressures we create, the students forget that they had a strategy, which is in itself a useful lesson. In several instances, our scenarios have come unsettlingly close to real events. Three years ago, for example, our crisis involved a small former republic of the Soviet Union, now an independent state, whose American-educated president was keen to take his country into NATO. The Russians objected to this, and at a critical moment seized a small portion of the country’s territory. Our simulated administration responded by deploying the Sixth Fleet into the Black Sea, and having it sail up the Dneister River. Without checking the water depths. And Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern weren’t even in the class that year.

## VII.

So what exactly are we trying to accomplish with this year-long seminar in grand strategy, how does it relate to the larger grand strategic deficit I’ve been describing? Let me reiterate that we aren’t trying to connect our course in any immediate way with the course of the country. We’re not sitting by our phones waiting from calls from Washington. We’re not even regularly checking our Blackberrys. We don’t expect our

students to go right away from running a simulated administration to significant responsibilities within a real one.

We are, however, thinking about long-term leverage: the possibility that a small but *well-placed* investment of thought, or effort, or money can – with *patience* – bring disproportionate benefits over an extended period of time. I emphasize those words because I don’t want to suggest analogies with the shorter-term leveraged assets that have been in the news recently.

I have in mind, rather, the leverage that comes from educating bright young people who, at the moment, have no clearer idea than we do of what they’ll wind up doing or how they’ll use the instruction we’re providing them. The only bet we’re making is that some of our students, at some point in the future, will be in a position to do some great things. Our only assumption is that, when they reach that point, some of them will remember something of what we tried to teach them.

And what was that? Chiefly, I hope, that it’s risky just to make it all up as you go along. That it helps to know something about what’s worked and what hasn’t over a period of time that exceeds your own. That Thucydides was onto something when he wrote that although history doesn’t repeat, it does resemble. Or, as Mark Twain added, it rhymes.

Hence, it’s useful to know how the Athenian democracy – the world’s first – became an overstretched, brutal, and self-destructive empire. Or how Rome, which was never a democracy, was able to hold on to its empire so much longer than Athens did. Or how Philip II and Elizabeth I anticipated a modern management dilemma – whether to concentrate authority or to delegate it – at the time of the Spanish Armada. Or how Kant and Metternich defined a civil society: they were closer than you might think. Or how Napoleon, like Hannibal, overextended his supply lines, and how Kutuzov, like Fabius Maximus Cunctator, was able to exploit that mistake. Or how the American Founding Fathers – including Lincoln, the nation’s Re-Founder – made so many tough choices that turned out to be right choices. Or how Churchill, at a critical moment in the spring of 1940, made a few great speeches that began the rescue of western civilization from the evils that had arisen within it. Knowing these things can give you a conceptual center of gravity. It can keep you from being swept away by foolish things.

History alone, though, is not enough: it’s equally important to do theory. Here the best guide is Clausewitz, who condemned

those people . . . who “*never rise above anecdote*” . . . and who would construct all history of individual cases – starting always with the most striking feature, the high point of the event, and digging down only as deep as suits them, never get[ting] down to the general factors that govern the matter. Consequently, their findings will never be valid for more than a single case.

Theory, Clausewitz insisted, “teaches us to recognize the relations that essential elements bear to one another.” But, he also pointed out, “it would indeed be rash from this to deduce universal laws governing every single case, regardless of all haphazard influences.”<sup>12</sup>

So how can there be a theory that’s not universal? That allows for haphazard influences while rising above anecdote? Clausewitz’s answer comes close to what Machiavelli told his prince:

Theory exists so that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order. It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, [but] not to accompany him to the battlefield; just as a wise teacher guides and stimulates a young man’s intellectual development, but is careful not to lead him by the hand for the rest of his life.<sup>13</sup>

Or, as Machiavelli himself put it: “God does not want to do everything.”<sup>14</sup> And where have you heard this before? Well, probably from parents, teachers, and even coaches, who sooner or later told you: “We’ve done all we can for you, kid, now you’re on your own.”

What does that mean, though: being on your own? I think it means benefiting as much as you can from what your educators have taught you, but not looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life while you wait for them to whisper the next set of instructions into your ear. It means being as much a fox as a hedgehog: you’ve got to combine the knowledge you’ve accumulated of one big thing – the profession you’re about to enter – with the ability to cope with all the little things for which your professional training will not have prepared you. That’s why, in our Yale course, the schools of the classics and of surprise precede the school of responsibility, for without that sequence, our students might do something irresponsible. Like, in the words of Clausewitz’s warning, attempting “to deduce universal laws governing every single case, regardless of all haphazard influences.”

### VIII.

And does such irresponsibility exist, these days, in the wider world? Do our leaders rely too heavily on theories, even as they too easily brush aside pesky details? I’ve suggested that a good deal of brushing aside took place in the case of NATO expansion, and there was certainly a theory that inspired it: it was that the advance of democracy, across all cultures and in the face of all difficulties, was irreversible; and that

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<sup>12</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 374.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>14</sup>Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 103.

because democracies don't fight one another, an acceleration of this advance would enhance the cause of peace.<sup>15</sup>

This theory originated in the academy, but because it emerged as the Cold War was ending, it gained greater traction within the policy community than would normally have been the case. It provided an explanation for what had happened that gratified both liberals and neo-conservatives, hence the support it received in the otherwise quite different administrations of Clinton and Bush. It provided assurance, on the basis of the recent past, of what the future was going to bring. It made NATO expansion look easy.<sup>16</sup>

A longer time horizon, however, might have provided a larger perspective. After all, democracy did suffer reversals in Europe after World War I. It survived for only a few months between the two Russian revolutions of 1917. It's never been robust in Latin America, despite the influence of the United States in that part of the world. It was two great democracies – the Union and the Confederacy – that fought one of the bloodiest civil wars of the 19th century. And, of course, there is the sad short history of Athenian democracy, whose demise Thucydides chronicled, with a view to projecting its lessons as far into the future as our own day, and even beyond.

How, then, could this belief in an irreversible advance of democracy arise within the academy, where there's a rigorous insistence on the testing of theories to keep questionable ones from taking hold? Well, there used to be, back in the days when disciplines exchanged their findings with one another. These days, however, the academic landscape strikes me as resembling the medieval landscape, and I don't just mean the architecture. I'm talking about the existence of castles, each of them equipped with high walls, deep moats, and bristling armaments, the purpose of which appears to be to repel raids from, or even commerce with, the departments just down the street. Attempts to break through these defenses, I've learned on more than one occasion, can echo the exploits of Don Quixote, who should perhaps become the patron saint of interdisciplinary studies.

So I don't have much confidence in the ability of universities, as currently organized, to scrutinize theories critically. For in too many fields now to question procedures is to challenge identity, and to defend them requires methodological and even ideological uniformity. The testing of theory that comes from disciplinary diversity is harder to accomplish now than it used to be in the bad old days when so many other forms of diversity did not exist.

But at least this over-reliance on theory doesn't happen within the eminently practical world of business, banking, and finance. Surely not. Or so most of us thought until recently. The revelatory moment came for me with the Congressional testimony last

<sup>15</sup>Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), and *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup>I've developed this argument a bit more fully in "Ending Tyranny: The History of an Idea," *The American Interest*, IV(September/October, 2008), 10.

October of former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan. “I’ve found a flaw,” he conceded, when asked if his faith in deregulation had been shaken. “Those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholders’ equity . . . are in a state of shocked disbelief.”<sup>17</sup>

Deregulation was, after all, a theory, put into practice as national policy in the Carter administration and continued ever since, under both Democratic and Republican presidents, with – until recently – mounting enthusiasm. The premise behind it was that markets know best: that Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” enhanced by sophisticated mathematical models and the computers necessary to run them, could function much as autopilots do in airplanes, calculating variables far faster than any human hand could ever manage in order to ensure the most efficient and profitable path from initial investment to ultimate payoff. For a while, it all seemed to work.

Again, though, a longer historical perspective – a simple list of financial panics extending all the way back to the South Sea Bubble of the 1720s or the Dutch Tulip-mania of 1637 – might have raised a few questions about Chairman Greenspan’s model. He seems to have been using it to escape from history, not to reflect it, and he was hardly alone in this.

Investigators of airplane crashes know that pilots will occasionally fly their planes, in perfectly good weather, right into the ground. Why? Because they’ve punched the wrong coordinates into their computer. The phenomenon even has an acronym: CFIT – “controlled flight into terrain.” “That’s not a mountain,” Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern will assure each other as they watch the one looming ahead through the windshield – in this scenario, they haven’t taken our class and won’t be. “The autopilot says it can’t be.”

## IX.

So could it be that one of the sources of our grand strategic deficit – if you agree with me that there is one – resides in an excessive reliance on autopilots? That’s what theory, when it’s misused, can become: you try to deduce universal laws governing every single case, regardless of all haphazard influences. Grand strategy, in contrast, demands both reliance on theories and the disposal of them. Knowing which to do when requires the ability to see all of the parts in relation to the whole: the vision is not that of a theorist but of a quarterback. For it’s only if you know where you’re trying to go and what stands in the way that you can make decisions about which theories to respect and which to abandon. And that brings us back, one more time, to the need for generalists.

Grand strategy is, as I said earlier, an *ecological* discipline. It’s about seeing forests and not just trees, about viewing the world as round and not square, about relating all of the means at your disposal to the ends you have in view. But it’s also, these days,

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<sup>17</sup>*New York Times*, October 24, 2008.

an *endangered* discipline, for in the absence of sufficiently grave threats to concentrate our minds, there are insufficient incentives to think in these terms. We ought to be able to reverse this trend without waiting for some new calamity to do it for us: we need not be bound forever by Dr. Johnson's principle. But that will require rethinking priorities at the places to which we look to train our leaders. I hope that Duke and Yale can be such places: that we can make our institutions as safe for generalists as they now are for specialists, that we can return to training grand strategic ecologists. For the need is great, and the time is nigh.